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Book Review of, Unimpeded Volition: William of Ockham: questions on goodness, virtue, and the will

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Late medieval nominalism gave a propulsion of almost unparalleled intellectual power to early modernity, right from the vast web of new signifiers that the printing press created continuing through seventeenth-century science. But it also, rather paradoxically, deeply influenced the invention of idealist ontology at the beginning of the eighteenth century and has not ceased to shape profound developments of this way of thinking in the centuries since. It mixes with Neoplatonism about as easily as it mixes with empiricism. But ontology, like metaphysics as a whole, is never just ontology; instead, it is an expression of moral philosophy and very high-order ethical commitments. Hence, seeing how a philosophical ethics consonantly grows from an ontology is a matter of real interest to us, who still struggle to ground normativity. We can now watch one of the leading advocates of nominalism, William of Ockham, dovetail his moral philosophy with his ontology in this collection of texts. It comes to us from Eric Hagedorn, who teaches in one of the American philosophy departments that is most actively committed to medieval philosophy. Hagedorn has chosen sections from Ockham's authorial works and from the reports that preserve lost authorial works and translated them with consistency and care. They are arranged as 27 topics in four major sections, with an excellent introduction by Hagedorn. As he notes, this does not exhaust Ockham's work on moral philosophy, but it complements translations of Ockham's major works. It is a handy, faithful, broad, helpful text for the study of Ockham's voluntarist and ontologically minimalist views of human and divine will, goodness, and grace. Ockham's work on ethics is best known for two views, although these by no means comprise the whole of his range in the field, as this book shows. The two positions are his voluntarism and his stance on Divine Command Theory. Voluntarism for Ockham means that our will, our free will, is the sole mechanism of moral responsibility. Our actions do not satisfy moral obligation, but instead it is our will in which our moral agency inheres, even though it is expressed in actions, which can be virtuous or not, and in reasons, which Ockham deflates. In this way he elevates the inner person above the virtues, which he regards more or less as abstractions. Human reasoning, however right, is not God's reasoning. When our will conforms to God's and we thereby do virtuous acts, internal as well and external, we make spiritual contact with the unchanging rectitude of God's command to be good, rather than finding merit in any intermediating thing, structure, or process. This position tends toward supporting the existential and moral integrity of human personhood and is a variety of theistic proto-personalism before the term or the concept entered philosophy. Our deeds, of

course, must remain right or wrong for Ockham, but clearly he is directing us toward considering God as the arbiter, or ground, or cause of whatever good is in them. We might put it in these terms, that in some way, our will is the channel by which we can know the Divine Command. To what extent Ockham actually supports Divine Command Theory, however, is contested in the scholarship on Ockham's ethics, of which there is all too little. But he does take pains to try to specify exactly what part of moral obligations God commands and how it affects our human morality and happiness. The communication, as it were, between divine will and human will has the knock-on effect of hiving nature off from the moral sphere and is thus a kind of naturalizing, or at least a particularizing, in which one need not rely on the transcendent to explain the natural or on the natural to explain the transcendent. No natural law is required because it would be too creaturely for the kind of truth and goodness that our will by acts, following God's commands, can bring to pass in ourselves and in the world. Our rationality, even in theological and moral reasoning, never decides what God's will alone determines, so that we are thrown back upon, or afflicted by, our choosing to will or not to will. This is fideistic, but it is also a realistic view of moral psychology that Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud would appreciate, apart from its theism. The picture that volitionism, and this sort of divine command combine to present, is barren of much metaphysical architectonic. And yet it has a kind of harmony that is exactly what we expect from the great parsimonious nominalist. Ockham's rejection of intermediating entities and concepts in the relations of God and human is like St. Gregory of Nyssa's rejection of intervals in divine temporality and of every kind of discontinuity, sequence, multiplicity, or process in divine activity. God has no need of hypostases; His creativity is His being. Similarly, Ockham sees the relation between creator and the created as analogical, a self-executing connection that does not need diachronic stages or synchronic multiple concepts. This point of view comes from and leads to thorough intellectual humility, as there is so much our most striving conceptualizations cannot grasp (sec 8.36/p. 107). But the driving force of Ockham's razoring of concepts is his defense of the unity of God (sec. 11.10/p. 132). "God causes as a total cause" (sec. 18.12/p. 238). Lest this be too laissez-aller, Ockham is at pains to justify authority in moral knowledge, both because the authorities themselves thought their way through their concepts (sec. 3.101/pp. 43–44) and because it has been generalized out of particular experiences (16.19–21/pp. 203–204). And, as a further caution, God can erasesin and infuse with grace or not quite without regard to our actions (sec. 19.38/p. 252; sec. 23.14/p. 270; sec 24.22/p. 290; and sec. 24.54/p. 300). Yet

Ockham is keen enough to see, in a striking passage on the satisfaction of appetite by pleasure, that our desires enjoy their pleasurable objects just because they have that, and only that, as their reason for being or acting (sec. 8.10/p. 102). Perhaps our understanding relates to its objects by a similar pre-theoretical intentionality. The texts that Hagedorn has assembled give us many opportunities to inspect Ockham's form of reasoning in a way that is all the more valuable for being tethered to the particular topics of moral philosophy, assisted as we are by the book's first-rate index. We can watch his mind at work on rape (sec. 2.26/p. 34), as well as on the several forms of love that Hagedorn very keenly distinguishes in his thinking (xvii–xviii). One text presents a particularly interesting and insightful, if somewhat puzzling, specimen of his reasoning about universals and particulars by comparing the alignment of particulars under a kind to sailors pulling a ship by ropes (sec. 16.16–22/pp. 127–128). We can also observe the style of argument and presentation that makes late Scholasticism intriguing and overwhelming. Ockham is meticulous in presenting the views of others whom he respects, such as Aquinas, before his own views. He then scrupulously examines the “worries” and objections to his position, turning it over to expose every side he can think of. That he, and many other magistri across Europe, could travel the forking paths of logic in many fields, year after year after year, more or less extemporaneously, in a comprehensive manner, tacking between doctrine and heresy, priming their imaginations for all the possibilities that the world presents for each problem of science, theory, and human behavior, is a wonder. There is solid value in this volume: hard reasoning about ethics from a master of tough thinking and a form of philosophy that works an idea from its ontological range to its casuistic range. These are set within a doctrine, nominalism, that had profound effects on all manner of intellectual conception and cultural production in the Renaissance. All this is collected here from sources that are very long and thorny into an exemplary compendium for ethics, logic, and philosophical method.